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ABSTRACT

This paper, a session proposal for a rural and small schools conference, reports on a project undertaken by 166 parents and staff of South Carolina's Target 2000 Parent Education Program to assess the effectiveness of the program's design and implementation process. The main research question studied concerned what were found to be the most effective parent education strategies for involving parents of at-risk preschool children in activities designed to strengthen the parent's status as their children's primary teachers. Through parent and staff interviews and questionnaires, it was found that the most effective parent program practices included: (1) using parent education activities that strengthened the family's literacy environment; (2) carrying out home visits that included both school readiness activities and services based on the individual needs of families; (3) involving parents in both parent-child literacy experiences and adult education; (4) using interagency and community resources to effectively meet parent and family needs; and (5) planning with parents in order to meet various family needs. (MDM)

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A Descriptive Analysis of South Carolina's Target 2000 Parent Education Program

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2) Description of the Research

a) Abstract

166 parents and project staff of South Carolina's Target 2000 Parent Education Program are engaged in assessing the effectiveness of the program's design and implementation process. The key components of the program (Parent Education, Literacy & Adult Education, Child Services, and Parent/Family Services) and the design and implementation process were examined in relationship to the effectiveness of strategies and resources used. Document analysis, focus group data, and narrative reports indicate that early childhood prevention oriented parent education programs need to be comprehensive with clear goals and supported through the use of multiple strategies and resources.

b) Research Question

The main research questions studied was: What parent education strategies were found to be effective in involving parents of preschool at-risk children in comprehensive educational and support activities that were designed to strengthen their status as their children's primary teachers?

c) Rationale

The study of effective parent education practices is critical to designing early childhood prevention programs that can engage families during the earliest period of life in proactive educational, social, health, and parent/family behaviors that have the potential to prevent or correct at risk situations of danger to parents, children, and families. Powell (1989) provides criteria by which to guide the development of parent education programs. These include factors such as parent-relevant goals, culturally sensitive staff, diverse activity and delivery system approaches, comprehensiveness, use of developmentally appropriate learning activities, and continuing evaluation. Other research suggests that parent education programs need continuing study to determine their viability for meeting goals, involving parents, and assessing the program/parent dynamics that heavily influence the outcome of program activities (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988).

South Carolina's Target 2000 Parent Education Program was designed with the criteria identified in the research as its foundation (Powell, 1989; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). It includes four key components: Parent Education, Literacy Training & Adult Education, Child Services, and Parent/Family Services. It is focused on increasing the competence of parents of preschool children (birth to 5 years of age) who are at-risk for school failure, while also attempting to provide all parents with access to parenting information. *One of the major purposes of the program during its first three years (1990-1993) was to pilot program strategies in 21 selected communities to determine their effectiveness in involving parents in comprehensive parent education activities.* In this regard, the following twelve questions were studied:

- 1) What are the major goals of the parent education program as implemented by the pilot projects?
- 2) How were the parent education program goals developed in the various pilot projects?
- 3) What delivery systems have the pilot projects used?
- 4) What program activities have been used in the pilot projects to achieve their identified goals?

- 5) What methods have the programs used to increase parent participation?
- 6) What staff development activities were used to enable staff to effectively carry out the program?
- 7) What types of interagency and school-community collaboration have been used?
- 8) What assessment processes have pilot projects used to record progress toward their goals?
- 9) What performance criteria and standards have the pilot projects used to determine their program effectiveness?
- 10) What evidence have pilot projects provided to support the achievement of their goals?
- 11) What have parents perceived as most important to them with regard to the activities in which they have participated?
- 12) How do parents perceive the impact of the program on themselves, their children, and their families?

d) Methodology

166 parents and the project staff of the 21 parent education pilot projects comprised the population of the study. The parents were representative of the at risk population served in the parenting projects. They were mostly poor, unemployed, single parents who lacked basic educational skills and who were experiencing multiple social and economic problems. They live in predominantly rural areas and typically have 2 or 3 children.

Data collection sources included: project documents, parent and staff interview forms, and narrative data collected during site visits to the pilot projects. Two particular data collection instruments were used: The Parent Focus Group Interview Form (PFGIF) and The Staff & Program Interview Form (SPIF).

e) Analysis

The data collected were analyzed according to the key components and major stages the projects used in implementing their projects. The data were also organized in a manner that relationships between program factors and participant factors could be studied. Further, data analysis aimed to provide insights on effective practices as reflected in the programs activities, strategies, and resource usage that could have a positive influence on parents, children, and families.

f) Findings

Data analysis supports the following as the main conclusions of the study.

- 1) The pilot projects achieved the goal of effectively designing and implementing comprehensive early childhood parent education with the parents and families of preschool children at risk for school failure.
- 2) The most effective program practices included: using parent education activities that strengthened the family's literacy environment; carrying out home visits that included both school

readiness activities and services based on the individual needs of the families served; using multiple delivery systems and support methods; involving parents in both parent-child literacy experiences and adult education; using interagency and community resources to effectively meet parent and family needs; promoting parent networking; and planning with parents in regards to meeting various family needs.

3) Strong intra-school and intra-district support positively influenced the integration of parent education into the school's early childhood education program.

4) Early indicators show that the parent education projects are influencing children's school readiness positively.

g) Implications

Some of the major implications of the study are: parent education programs should be comprehensive and address the multiple needs of parents, children, and families in a preventive manner; adequate staff training and support resources are essential; goals and objectives need to be clearly delineated within the needs structure of local communities; family literacy and adult training/education should receive major attention; interagency collaboration and community involvement are needed to achieve maximum human services; and longitudinal assessments of program dynamics are critical to the long-range success of such efforts.

3) Highlighted Main Thrust of Presentation

The main thrust of the study is on describing and analyzing the impact of a comprehensive parent education program on parents of at risk preschool children, with a major focus on delineating practices that are effective in the design and implementation process. The findings provide insights on effective parent education practices that emphasize a preventive approach to working with parents, children, and families.